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Muslims Need A Change of Outlook

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

A popular misconception which has arisen in latter years is that the Muslim problem is the product of Islam itself. There is consequently the widely held view that if the Muslim problem has to be solved, the Muslim religion is in need of reconsideration, if not actually of overhaul. But this theory has no argument to support it.

In the second installment of his article, "Muslims After Partition," (*The Times of India*, January 7); Mr. Girilal Jain writes: "The Indian Muslim perception of having ruled over India for a thousand years played a major role in the rise of Muslim 'nationalism' in the subcontinent." He makes the point that, this Muslim self-definition in terms of a glorious past is not entirely tenable, considering that the "glory" of the past had been based on an only partially consolidated sovereignty, and his verdict is that "the gap between self-definition and reality has dogged the Indian Muslims and through them the rest of us since at least the middle of the nineteenth century." While I would agree that a change of outlook on the past of Indian Muslims would solve many of the problems, I feel that the "glory" of the Muslims' part having been shown in a controversial light, tends to obscure the real issue, which is that no community which is content to bask in the glories of the past (whether real or imaginary) can ever be a success in the world of today.

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Larger History

To put this issue into its proper perspective, however, we must not overlook the fact that this "one-thousand-year-rule" mentality of Indian Muslims is not a purely local phenomenon, but is a part of the larger history of Islam. The extraordinary conquests of Muslims in the past, which brought about the spread of Islam, are incontrovertible facts of history. Dr. Michael Hart, in his book, *The Hundred*, (New York, 1978) places the Prophet of Islam at the "top of the hundred best." "He was the only man in history", he writes, "who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels." "There is, perhaps, nothing more amazing in the whole long history of mankind than the extent and the rapidity of the dissemination of Islam." (*The Times*, London, April 2, 1976)

Let us not deny, then, that Islam did have a glorious past. But the more glorious the past, the more wrong-headed it is for present-day Indian Muslims to live in that past. The mistake they make is not so

much to exaggerate the glitter of a bygone era, as to believe implicitly that that era extends right up to the present. That is the belief which continually adds fuel to the fire of their paranoia.

While Mr. Jain has laid stress on the Muslim predicament having arisen from the "gap between self-definition and reality," I would put it more plainly, and say that it is overweening pride which renders them incapable of adapting to present-day conditions. They think of themselves, quite simply, as a superior group. But the truth is, that in comparison to all other nations, there is no sphere in which they have not actually regressed. It is little wonder that the external world does not accord them the same lofty position as they do themselves. World journalism, which is almost wholly in the hands of non-Muslims, paints a sad picture of their inferiority. Their sense of superiority, of course, rejects this outright; but their only other responses are mental agitation, neurosis and a great deal of unnecessary skirmishing with imagined foes. Where Mr. Jain has based his analysis on Muslims' self-definition vis-a-vis the past, I would say that the root of the Muslim problem lies in their erroneous self-definition vis-a-vis the present. To put it another way, the case of Indian Muslims is not one of false interpretation of history, rather it is one of false pride in their past history.

A popular misconception which has arisen in latter years is that the Muslim problem is the product of Islam itself. There is consequently the widely held view that if the Muslim problem has to be solved, the Muslim religion is in need of reconsideration, if not actually of overhaul. But this theory has no argument to support it. The truth is that whatever malaise afflicts the Muslims, it is entirely the creation of their own leaders. In modern times, when Muslim domination came to an end, Muslim leaders began to project this new situation as the result of oppression, whereas it was simply a question of the changes which, came with the passage of time. The problem ought to have been solved by a better adaptation to changed sets of circumstances, but the only course which these leaders saw fit to take was that of protest. Such efforts were doomed to end in failure. And we see evidence of that failure on all sides.

The modern, dominant nations were, in fact, representatives of a new era. Theirs was a new age which brought a great revolution in human thought. Traditional knowledge yielded pride of place to scientific disciplines, and the rise of technology caused profound changes in every sphere of life: industrial produce replaced handicrafts, the steamship replaced the sail boat, long-range automatic weapons replaced the musket, and so on. It was the slowness of Muslims to bring themselves abreast of these developments which left them far behind others in the race of life and not, as is generally supposed, the plotting, conspiracies and oppression of other nations.

When it became clear that there was a challenge to Muslim superiority, and it was known exactly what the nature of that challenge was, Muslim leaders should immediately have set about taking concrete steps to end the disparities between Muslim nations and the more technologically advanced nations of the world. What they did, on the contrary, was to open a wholly useless front to oppose and protest against these dominant powers; how regrettable that they should have remained blind to the futility of such combativeness right up to the present day.

Had they made a timely assessment of what created the hiatus between Muslims and other nations, they would have set the feet of Muslims on the path of education, and would, in the process, have enabled them to acquire the strengths of the modern world. Their energies would then have contributed to a positive struggle, instead of being frittered away in negative reaction.

Strange Psychology

One notable instance of this very strange psychology was their response to the setting up in Calcutta of the first medical college in India by Lord William Bentinck in 1835. Because of their hatred of the English “usurpers and conspirators,” the Muslims led a procession through the streets to protest against the opening of this college, and demanded that it be closed. There then ensued the strange spectacle of other communities thronging to seek admission, while Muslims clamoured for its closure. By adopting this negative stance, Muslims lagged more than 100 years behind other communities in medical sciences.

This event is symbolic of the causes of the Muslim dilemma in the world of today. And there is no sign of any abatement of this general negativism. Surely they must one day realize that the prejudice and discrimination which they so loudly decry would rapidly disappear if they were to simply apply themselves with the utmost dedication in the academic and economic fields. In this way they would remove the obstacle of their own backwardness, and, with that, the stigma of intellectual and social inferiority. This accomplished, they would be able, as an updated and self-rehabilitated community, to stand shoulder to shoulder with the most advanced nations of the world.

There is Always a Solution

Adaptability and the willingness to compromise in the face of difficult and changing sets of circumstances have been shown over and over again to be the keys to successful living.

There is a saying that if you change yourself, your luck will change automatically. This is no doubt what T.S. Eliot had in mind when he suggested that if you find yourself in a hole, you should turn yourself into a ball.

Living in this world means facing a variety of problems – some created by nature, others by human beings. Whatever the nature of the problem, the wise man does not solve it in a direct, confrontational way. He is circumspect in his approach, and makes due concessions to external circumstances which are beyond normal, human control. He avoids the kind of head-on approach which causes friction and builds up tension. Taking care not to be over-rigid in his attitudes, he is always on the look-out for the best via media. If he ever resorts to fighting, it is out at the sheer necessity to defend himself. Adaptability and the willingness to compromise in the face of difficult and changing sets of circumstances have been shown over and over again to be the keys to successful living.

Japan, in this respect, is one of the shining examples of modern times. Often rocked by earthquakes, it is a country which had suffered great losses in terms of life and property. But then, the Japanese, realizing that an earthquake is a cataclysmic happening over which no one can have any control, began building with wood, bamboo and other light weight materials instead of brick and stone, so that there would be less danger to human life if whole buildings collapsed, and material losses would in general be minimized. It was simply a question of bowing to the superior forces of nature.

In the world of the automobile, the name Toyota (a superior type of Japanese car) has become almost a household word. But, fifteen years ago, the Toyota company manufactured not cars, but textiles. The business, however, was not a success, partly because Japan does not produce its own raw materials, and a point came when it was considered necessary to stop production. But the Toyota company, instead of closing down and going out of business, switched to the motor car industry, in which there were greater opportunities, and now there are few roads in the world on which Toyota cars are not to be seen. Their success was like that of the man who, at first, cannot make an entry into the field of his choice by jumping over high walls, but who later achieves his goal by learning how to enter through locked doors.

A similar tale is that of one of Japan's four big daily newspapers, which, having run into serious losses, was faced with ultimate closure. But the Japanese are highly appreciative of their national journalism and consider it almost a sacred duty to keep it alive. Companies and semi-official institutions, therefore, began to give it large-scale advertisements on a regular basis and a Japanese bank advanced it a sizeable loan, with repayment on an easy installment plan. But the most remarkable assistance came from the

newspaper employees themselves. They told the management that the statutory increment in their salary should be withheld until the paper's finances stabilized. With everyone rallying round in this way, the newspaper soon re-established its position in national journalism. Had everyone adopted the attitude of rats leaving a sinking ship, the newspaper would certainly have had to close its doors. It is a true saying that 'by helping others, one helps oneself.' Once the exact nature of a problem is understood, and we are willing to make strenuous efforts – sometimes on a very long-term basis – towards resolving it, a just solution can always be found. Take the case of the world-famous boxing champion, Cassius Clay – known later in his career as Mohammed Ali – who, from quite humble circumstances, rose to a position of remarkable eminence. One of his early recollections, when he was a boy of 12, was of watching shiny, luxurious cars speeding along the highways, and then, one day, of his asking his father why they didn't have a car. His father immediately pointed out that they were blacks, and it was only the whites who could travel in such beautiful cars. "Dad," he asked, "is it a crime to be black?" His father then explained that blacks were never given high-salaried jobs, and that it was as much as they could do to make two ends meet. There was no question of being able to afford a car. But then, seeing the look of despair on his son's face, he decided to buy a bicycle, although he could ill-afford it. Young Cassius was delighted with this gift, and cycled from one street to another, whistling and ringing his bell for the sheer joy of it. Then he parked his cycle outside a shop while he went in to buy something. As he came back out, he saw a white boy riding away on it at top speed. He rushed after him, but could not catch up with him. Gasping for breath, he approached a policeman to lodge a complaint, but the policeman, seeing that it was only a black boy he had to deal with, turned away and refused to pay any attention to him. At this point, one might have expected Cassius to develop an intense hatred for the whites and have a keen desire to avenge himself for their unjust behaviour. But, instead of allowing his thoughts to be swamped by feelings of loathing and revenge, he turned them instead to scrutinizing the feeling of inferiority which the blacks experience because of the colour of their skin. He began to reason that no one should feel inferior to others just because of being black. He did, however, express his indignation to the policeman. He told him that if he caught hold of the thief, he would break his neck. The policeman, unimpressed, made fun of him. "Go and learn how to break a nose first!" he said. This ironic rejoinder sent his thoughts spinning. He decided to rise to this challenge, and that very day, he began to learn how to box. Now his triumphs as a boxer are known all over the world, and with his prize money he can buy as many elegant cars as he wishes, and stay in the kind of hotels where princes and heads of state are accommodated.

"It was actually my gnawing feeling of being backward, that gave me the impetus to go forward. "

At a recent interview, Muhammad Ali said that if his father had not made him aware of his inferiority complex and had not presented him with a bicycle instead of the car he was longing for, he would not have become a world boxing champion. "It was actually my gnawing feeling of being backward, that gave me the impetus to go forward."

Patience and Piety

The truly pious person ceases to live on purely human level; he ascends to a divine level where, above all else, he cherishes the will of God, and where all of his actions are aimed at consolidating the blessings promised to him by his Maker. Externally, he may appear to be living in this world, but, in fact, he is living on an exalted plane where his inner senses are in tune with the everlasting world of God.

Of all the innumerable people who inhabit this world besides ourselves, there are few who are not trying to achieve some kind of success, or who are not at least striving to outdo their fellow-men. To attain these ends, they will proceed as they please, for they have been given complete freedom of action by their Creator. There is, therefore, a never-ending scramble for the good things of life, a constant jockeying for position, and an all-too-frequent lack of scruple in elbowing contenders out of the way. We have to face the sad fact of life, that in this ongoing rough and tumble, the weakest are those who will fall by the wayside. There is no way of averting the hurts and losses of our competitive existence, for that is simply the way that God has made the world. This, it should be noted, is not a feature peculiar to parts of the world where Muslims and non-Muslims live cheek by jowl. It is characteristic of human existence all over the world, and is certainly to be found in all-Muslim communities.

The world being as it is, problems cannot be solved by coming into conflict with everyone whose interests clash with our own. There is only not effective approach, and that is to adopt the policy of avoidance (*Iraddh*) favoured by the Quran. Only by sidestepping those who try to obstruct our progress in life can we continue on our journey with any success. But in order to pursue such a course, the virtue of patience must be sedulously cultivated. To adopt a policy of restraint and simply remove oneself from the path of someone who is bent on being obstructive does require a high degree of forbearance.

But then, the alternative-attaining one's objectives in an aggressive, confrontational way-means being anti-social and creating disharmony on a variety of fronts, all of which is inconsistent with the ideals of social order.

Believers are fortunate in having the assurances of the Quran that so long as they are guided by the tenets of their faith, they will not be harmed in any way by the malice or misdeeds of their opponents. Here are just two of the verses which throw light on this subject:

Believers, you are accountable for yourselves; he that goes astray cannot harm you, if you are on the right path (5:105).

If you are patient and guard yourselves against evil, their machinations will never harm you. God has knowledge of all their actions (3: 120).

This means that believers should be more concerned with their own inner state than they are with the external conditions in which they find themselves, and that, above all, they should adhere to the guidance they have received from God, for this will lead them along the paths of patience and piety. The nurturing of these qualities will build up a protective barrier against plotting and conspiracies. It will, indeed, provide them with an impenetrable defence.

But why is it that patience is such a rare quality in human beings? It is because it entails the suppression of one's feelings when provoked and the suffering of losses and setbacks without protest – neither of which is an easy thing to do. It is only those who can rise above the petty vengefulness engendered by such situations who will be successful in developing this virtue. The first step towards its attainment is the piety so strongly advocated by the Quran; it means, in effect, having an eternal fear of God in one's heart.

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The Quranic Concept of Punishment A Modern Confirmation.

Now there is the view that carrying out the death sentence, in this private, low-key manner has little impact on the public conscience. What should provide a fear-inspiring, moral lesson for all has become just another news item.

The death penalty, held at one stage in America to be a "cruel and unusual punishment" was abolished, but only temporarily, for soaring crime rates subsequently lead the Supreme Court to reintroduce it in 1982. However, a more humane method of carrying out the death sentence was adopted: the criminal was rendered unconscious, given a lethal injection, then quietly buried.

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The American news agency AFP reports from Huntsville, Texas, that the Attorney General of that state, Jim Maddox, has called for executions in Texas to be filmed and shown on television, so that the public can see how a criminal is put to death. (Texas has executed 28 prisoners by lethal injection since capital punishment was reintroduced in 1982). His view is that executions have become so routine that their deterrent value is being lost. *The Times of India*, June 30, 1987).

Here we have up-to-the-minute confirmation of the time-honoured Islamic concept of punishment, i.e. that to be effective, it must be commensurate with the crime, rigorously applied and meted out in public.

Putting the Message Across

When after the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, the Prophet Mohammad sent letters to the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula, inviting them to accept Islam, one such letter was despatched in the names of three members of the ruling family of Himyar, an ancient and powerful Arab tribe who had ruled for hundreds of years over the country now known as the Yemen. (The details of this episode are recorded in *Tabaqat Ibn Saad*, *Al-Bidayah wa al Nihayah* and other authentic histories of the period).

Ayash Ibn Rabiya, the companion of the Prophet who carried this letter to the Yemen, was specifically instructed by the Prophet to keep on reciting the words, "I seek refuge with God from the accursed Satan," while on his way, to offer two rakaats of prayers, and to pray to God for the success of his mission immediately upon reaching his destination. He was later to present the Prophet's letter to Harith, Masruh and Nuayam Ibn Kalal, the three members of the ruling family to whom it was addressed.

Ayash did exactly as he had been instructed. He never ceased to recite, "I seek refuge with God from the accursed Satan," on his way, and after offering the two *rakaats*, he prayed for himself and for those to whom he had been sent. Only then did he enter their residence. History tells us that these three men were greatly affected by the Prophet's invitation, and thereupon in the year 9 AH, entered the fold of Islam. This episode shows the spirit in which a missionary of God should go about his task. If the individual who is invited to accept the Truth is in an obdurate frame of mind, there is every possibility that he will see fit to assert himself, thus causing a great deal of unpleasantness. The preacher of God's word must then ignore all rudeness or aggressiveness in the potential convert, and sedulously avoid succumbing to provocation. Should he weaken and give in to provocation, he must immediately realize that this is the work of Satan, and should "seek refuge with God." It is not enough that he should be zealous in reforming people and that he should pray for their right guidance: he must also be sincere in wishing them well.

God is Not Deaf

What the Muslims of today need to undertake as a matter of the first priority is the most thorough internal reconstruction. But they should first understand that it is not prejudice and oppression which is at the root of their suffering, but their own sub-standard performance in today's competitive world.

In the present day and age, the situation in which Muslims find themselves is an extremely delicate one. Constantly provoked into confrontation, they must nevertheless concern themselves almost exclusively with the avoidance of all forms of conflict. It is a time for them to remain patient, and it is certainly not the moment for them to be conducting *jihad*. On the contrary, it is a time for them to realize that to adopt the path of patience and avoidance – far from being an act of cowardice – is to provide themselves with a much-needed period of respite in which to engage in earnest self-reconstruction.

This is not to say that one should never fight for one's rights. There are times when it would be right and proper to do so, and suicidal not to. But the course of action one adopts is inevitably dependent on a particular sets of circumstances. Sometimes it is correct to enter into direct confrontation and sometimes it is more discreet to lie low. For example, during the Prophet Mohammad's period in Mecca, his Companions once asked his permission to make a direct onslaught on the enemies of Islam, but the Prophet restrained them and made them recognize the value of patience. On another occasion, when various tribes launched a concerted attack on Medina, the Prophet did not counsel a counter-attack, but instead had a trench dug all around the city so that the question of a direct clash was completely ruled out. One year later, when the Muslims were on their way to Mecca, some of them began to shout the battle cry: "Allahu Akbar!" thereby drawing attention to their approach. The Prophet immediately told them to desist, as God was not so deaf that He could not hear their invocations.

Episodes such as these show us that nothing should be done on impulse. We should not rush blindly into things without giving due consideration to what the situation demands. Sometimes it takes much careful thought before the wisest course can be arrived at.

What the Muslims of today need to undertake as a matter of the first priority is the most thorough internal reconstruction. But they should first understand that it is not prejudice and oppression which is at the root of their suffering, but their own sub-standard performance in today's competitive world. If they are to be at all successful in this process of self-uplift, they must grasp the necessity for patience and restraint, particularly when it comes to swallowing grievances and forgetting grudges. But this attitude will be of value only if it is coupled with a readiness to ignore problems and to seize opportunities. Any other path which Muslims choose to adopt will only lead them further and further down that very road to self-destruction which they seem to have been bent on following for such a very long time.

14 March 1988

Socialism: An impractical method of government

Mario Soares, leader of Portugal's socialist party, first came to power in 1976, and was elected in June 1983 for a second term as Portugal's Prime Minister. The first problem that he encountered as ruler of his country was how to introduce Socialism when an ailing economy can only be restored by methods inimical to socialist doctrine. He came to the conclusion that, "We must leave Socialism in the drawer."

14 March 1988

Everyone has something to give

The Prophet said: “For every limb of man’s body, for every new day, there is an act of charity to be performed. To judge fairly between two people is an act of charity. To give someone a hand climbing on his mount, or taking luggage off it, is an act of charity. A good word is an act of charity. To remove any obstacle from a path is an act of charity.”

(Bukhari and Muslim)

The Last Security Check

It is written in the Quran that the one to be saved in the Hereafter will be he who is the object of an "easy reckoning." The Prophet affirmed this by saying: "One who is examined is doomed." Furthermore, the Prophet asserted that no one could attain salvation in the Hereafter purely on the strength of his own actions. It was only God's mercy and bounty which would save him on the Last Day.

At a conference I attended in Delhi in 1986, security precautions were exceptionally strict because a leading political figure was due to inaugurate the proceedings. Everyone entering the Conference Hall was checked by Security Police using electronic devices. As I approached the gate of the Conference Hall, the security men stepped forward to make their routine check. However, a highly placed official of the Organizing Committee, a Mr. Bajaj, who happened to be with me at the time, waved them aside and said, "Let him go in. There's no need to check him."

This incident suddenly made me think of what would happen on the Last Day. It all seemed very similar. When anyone made as if to enter the gates of paradise, the Angels would stop him and check him. The only one to be saved and allowed to enter would be one of whom God would say, "Do not check him. Let him come in." Those handed over to the Angels to be checked would never attain salvation.

It is written in the *Quran* that the one to be saved in the Hereafter will be he who is the object of an "easy reckoning." The Prophet affirmed this by saying: "One who is examined is doomed." Furthermore, the Prophet asserted that no one could attain salvation in the Hereafter purely on the strength of his own actions. It was only God's mercy and bounty which would save him on the Last Day.

Awareness of the perils of the Hereafter does much to change wrong attitudes. It can, in fact, effect a complete transformation in an erring human being. A man who was once callous would then rush to the aid of those in adversity. His logic would be simple. If he did not do so, God would be deaf to his entreaties and indifferent to his fate on that awesome Day of Reckoning, when he found his way barred to paradise by the Angels of the Almighty.

Paying back what one owes others

A few days before he died, the Prophet delivered an unusually long speech. finally he said: "I want to be able to present a clean sheet of my life to God. If I owe anybody anything, which I forgot to repay, or have physically or mentally harmed anyone without my knowledge, then I request him to accept compensation or forgive me." The Prophet finished speaking and waited a while, but no one spoke up. He then prayed the early afternoon prayer, after which he repeated his request. A man rose and said: "Prophet of God, you owe me five dirhams." The Prophet gave instructions for him to be repaid, there and then.

TAKING NO NOTICE OF PRAISE AND FLATTERY

Some people told Umer that they had never seen anyone more just, truthful and severe with hypocrites, than him. "Commander of the faithful," they said, "you are the best person after the Prophet." Auf Ibn Malik was also present at the time. When he heard this, he told these people that what they said was not true. "After the Prophet, we have seen better than Umer," he said. they asked who that person was. Auf told them it was Abu Bakr. Then Umer himself spoke up: "Auf is right and you people are wrong," he said. "God knows, the fragrance of musk is nothing compared to the purity of Abu Bakr; and as for me, I am more misguided than the camels of my household.

Overstepping Oneself

The possible versus the impossible

In persistently straining after something which is ultimately unattainable, one not only wastes valuable time and energy, but also steers one's course quite irreversibly away from objectives which in the long run could prove more fruitful and more satisfying.

After the death of Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri, former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was elected Prime Minister by the Congress Party. But there was a never-ending conflict between Mrs. Gandhi and Mr. Morarji Desai, because the latter aspired to prime ministership himself. After the 1967 elections, he was made Deputy Prime Minister, but this did not satisfy him, for he considered this office beneath him. In this way, the conflict between the two leaders went on. The former Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. I.K. Gujral, writes that in 1969, Mrs. Gandhi offered to make Morarji Desai president. But it seems that when this offer was conveyed to him by Mr. Gujral, he retorted, "Why not she herself?" (*The Times of India*, 12 July, 1987). In other words, why couldn't she let him be Prime Minister!

Later, Mr. Desai left the Congress Party, but still worked towards becoming Prime Minister. Finally, after the March '77 elections, he did, with the victory of the Janata Party, become Prime Minister. But it was only for a short period, and he was soon faced with a political decline from which he was never to recover.

His political failure has been attributed to his straining after the impossible. Had he realized that the most prudent course for him was the acceptance of presidentship, he might well have saved himself from the humiliation, failure and descent into oblivion which he ultimately suffered. As it was, his pursuance of the impossible deprived them even of what had been at one time within the realms of the possible.

While striving towards a worthy objective is in itself a laudable activity, it should first be ascertained whether that objective is genuinely within one's reach. In persistently straining after something which is ultimately unattainable, one not only wastes valuable time and energy, but also steers one's course quite irreversibly away from objectives which in the long run could prove more fruitful and more satisfying. What has to be avoided is the initial, egotistical error of judgement which launches one on an over-ambitious course.

18 March 1988

Dearest to God is one with the best character

A few of the Companions were sitting with the Prophet. So silent were they that it was as if there were birds perched upon their heads. No one was saying a word, but some people came up and asked: "Who does God love most among His servants?" "The one with the best character," the Prophet replied.

Forsaking this world for the next

Aisha says that one of the Companions came to the Prophet and said to him: "I have two slaves who persistently deceive, betray and disobey me. I beat them and scold them in return. How do I stand in relation to them?" The Prophet replied:

"Their disobedience, perfidy and deception will be weighed up, and so will the reprisals you take against them. If your reprisals are equal to their crimes then the two will balance one another out: nothing will be left owing to you, and you will not owe anything. And if your reprisals are less than their crimes then you will be paid the balance. But if the reprisals you took against them are more weighty than the crimes they committed, then they will be repaid from the grace that was previously yours." The man started crying in front of the Prophet. "Why, have you not read the Book of God," the Prophet said to him: "And We shall set up just scales on the Day of Resurrection, so that no man shall in the least be wronged. Actions as small as a grain of mustard seed We will bring (to be weighed out). And sufficient are We as reckoners (2:47)." Prophet of God," the man said, "I think it would be best for me to be rid of them. You are witness to the fact that I have freed them all.

(Musnad Imam Ahmad)

When the Dam Bursts ...

They think that by closing a door here and a window there, they have done enough, and that the rest will come about by wishful thinking.

“Every time I close the door on reality, it comes in through the window”.

This rueful remark, made by a western writer, Ashleigh Briluan, could well be applied to Muslim attitudes today. Deluged as they are by a flood of new realities, they close their front doors only to find the flood waters pouring in through the back door, the windows, over walls and through gates. There is no stopping their turbulent ingress. In other words, the national existence of Muslims is under attack on all sides, but, without their attempting to make a prompt and objective assessment of the challenge, they can never make their position secure. They think that by closing a door here and a window there, they have done enough, and that the rest will come about by wishful thinking. They even imagine that simply by asking the flood waters to take a different course, their problems are going to be solved. But by now, the flood has so penetrated each and every corner of Muslim existence that there is no aspect of their identity which has not been eroded.

The starting point for Muslim reconstruction is the open-minded acceptance of their own backwardness. It is only when they have adopted this position that they will be able to take their first genuine steps towards updating themselves as modern denizens of the world of today.

A LESSON FOR LEADERS

There is no one in the world who displays greater power than one who answers stridency with calmness, ruffianly behaviour with sobriety, who, faced with contumacy, makes a gift of gentleness and love in return.

On one occasion in Damascus, the first Umayyad Caliph, Amir Muawiyah, distributed some sheets, one of which was given to an elderly Damascan who numbered among the Ansar. Dissatisfied with the particular sheet he had been given, he became angry and shouted, "By God, I will hit Muawiyah on the head with this sheet!"

Muawiyah at that time was Caliph of a colossal Muslim empire, but he did not become angry at what the old man had said. Instead, he sent for him and, uncovering his own head, he said: "Go ahead and carry out your oath but remember, one old man should take pity on another." The Ansari, ashamed of himself, asked the Caliph's forgiveness and quietly went away." (*Ad-Dawah*, 12 Jamadi al Awwal, 1407 AH).

If, in response to the old man's outburst, Muawiyah had become infuriated and reacted vengefully, the matter would have escalated, increasing friction on both sides and the seeds of dissension would have been sown throughout society. But Muawiyah deliberately avoided displaying any negative reaction and, answering anger with coolness, bowed to his would-be opponent, thus forestalling the development of negative tendencies in society as a whole.

Muawiyah might well have acted quite differently. His line of thinking could have been, "If I adopt a forgiving stance, my authority over the people will be compromised and it will become difficult to keep order in governing them". But this would have been a highly superficial assessment of the situation, for never in the entire course of history has anarchy resulted from the adoption of a forgiving attitude on the part of a ruler. It might easily be assumed that disorder would ensue, but, in fact, events take quite the contrary course.

There is no one in the world who displays greater power than one who answers stridency with calmness, ruffianly behaviour with sobriety, who, faced with contumacy, makes a gift of gentleness and love in return.

In the Shadow of Swords

The Prophet's saying: "Paradise lies in the shadow of swords" is indisputably a reference to the act of fighting as a matter of self-defence, and can not by any stretch of the imagination be construed to mean that doing battle in the name of Islam is a guarantee of one's admission to Paradise.

"Paradise lies in the shadow of swords." This statement was made by the Prophet Mohammad is recorded in *Hadith* literature. Taken in its original context, it is an exhortation to peaceful coexistence. Recently, however, it was presented-out of context-as *The Times of India's* 'Thought for Today' (May 19, 1987) and, as a result, has become the subject of gross misinterpretation, willful or otherwise. One reader remarked that he now knew why Muslims were always ready for a fight. "This is only natural when their Prophet has himself said: 'Paradise lies in the shadow of swords.' Obviously, once they have heard this asserted, there will be nothing dearer to their hearts than war and martyrdom. Isn't it their profound conviction that to die on the field of battle is to ensure their passage through the gates of heaven?"

The only way to rectify such a glaring misconception is to put the Prophet's statement back into its original context. The full text of the original Hadith is as follows:

Salim relates that a letter written to the Kharijite sect by Abd Allah ibn Abi Awfa, and conveyed to them by Amr ibn Ubaydullah, tells of how on certain days, when the Prophet was engaged in a military campaign, he would wait until the sun had almost set and then, standing up amidst his Companions, he would say: 'Oh my people, be not eager to meet the enemy on the field of battle. Ask God instead for peace. But, when confronted by the enemy, stand fast and do not flinch. You must know that Paradise lies in the shadow of swords? Then the Prophet prayed to God: 'Oh Allah, You who reveal the Scripture, who set the clouds afloat, who defeat armies defeat them, and grant us succour in our struggle against them.'

This passage, recorded in three major works on the *Hadith*, respectively by Bukhari, Muslim and Abu Dawood, appears in each case in the chapter on *Jihad* (holy war). But according to all three authors – all of them Imams – the true message of this *Hadith* is that there should be no keenness to meet the enemy on the field of battle. The chapters in which this Hadith is included are in fact, centred on this theme. Bukhari entitles his chapter: "Have no longing to meet the enemy on the field of battle and both Muslim and Abu Dawood have headed their chapters: "Disapproval of eagerness to meet the enemy on the field of battle." Quite clearly, all three Imams take this *Hadith* as an exhortation to keep the peace and, in no instance, do they take it as an incitement to do battle.

The Prophet's saying: "Paradise lies in the shadow of swords" is indisputably a reference to the act of fighting as a matter of self-defence, and can not by any stretch of the imagination be construed to mean that doing battle in the name of Islam is a guarantee of one's admission to Paradise. It only signifies that when Muslims are attacked, they must resolutely defend themselves. There should be no aggression on the part of the believers, but, when forced to defend themselves, they should do so with the utmost steadfastness. Then they can be sure of Paradise as their reward.

Islamic Law and Practice: Popular Misconception

The incident of 18 year-old Roop Kanwar's self immolation on September 4, 1987, at Deorala (Sikar, Rajasthan) was, indeed, tragic, and it is little wonder that all over the country, the voices of the serious-minded were raised in protest. We have no quarrel with the vehement condemnation of the Sati tradition which this incident called forth; what we do object to is the ill-judged bracketing of this tradition with Islamic convention.

A case in point is an observation made by India's former Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. I.K. Gujral, in the course of an otherwise pertinent article, "Widow Burning – A National Shame," which appeared in *The Telegraph* of October 20, 1987. Having pointed out that "the obnoxious act of widow-burning – euphemistically called Sati – in a remote village of Rajasthan, has highlighted the prevalence of this mediaeval barbarity in our country even today," he goes on to say that "unless nipped in the bud, fundamentalism can take on militant dimensions." Up to this point, there was nothing to dispute in what Mr. Gujral had to say. But what of his ensuing remark, "The Muslim fundamentalists had succeeded in browbeating the leadership to get a law enacted that gave them the traditional rights to maltreat female divorcees of their community"?

(The law referred to by Mr. Gujral is that of the Muslim Women Protection of Rights on Divorce, enacted in 1986) The words "to maltreat female divorcees of their community" having been placed between inverted comas by the author would lead the unwary reader into believing that this is part of the wording of the Bill, but at no point in the text do these words appear. Neither is the evil suggested by these words an integral feature of either Islamic law or practice.

This act, which has been the subject of so much heated controversy, can be briefly summed up in terms of the provisions to be made for a divorced Muslim woman. After the *Iddah* period (3 months and 13 days) the responsibility for her monthly expenses does not in normal circumstances fall to the former husband. Her maintenance is to be provided for by the property she is entitled to inherit (moveable and immoveable) from both parents 'and her parents-in-law, – a practice which has religious sanction. In the case of there being no such provision, and none of her relatives to shoulder this responsibility the Waqf Board of the State is responsible for her expenses. This is enforceable by law through a magistrate.

One of the reasons for couples beginning to ignore the marriage bond in Western countries is the prospect of the husband being financially ruined by the never-ending payments of alimony which the law requires him to make to his ex-wife.

How then can a shift of responsibility from the husband to others be called maltreatment? Suppose the husband is earning very little, or nothing at all, or he expires shortly after the divorce, doesn't his ex-wife stand to gain from such an Act? It may seem paradoxical, but the whole institution of marriage is strengthened by there being no inordinate financial burden placed upon the husband at the time of separation. One of the reasons for couples beginning to ignore the marriage bond in Western countries is the prospect of the husband being financially ruined by the never-ending payments of alimony which the law requires him to make to his ex-wife.

A more important feature of Islamic convention, perhaps, is that there is no taboo on a widow-remarrying, in which case, a divorced woman would no longer be in need of any of the above-mentioned provision.

Very different is Hindu tradition, according to which a widow cannot re-marry. But what is worse is that, once widowed, the Hindu woman cannot hope to lead an honourable life in her own society. One reason is the commonly held belief that if her husband died, it was because her presence in the family was inauspicious.

In most parts of India, the widow is considered to be a *kulakshani* (evil omen) or a *daaken* (one who eats her husband). The treatment she receives from her deceased husband's family is, therefore, degrading in the extreme. She is forced to perform menial tasks, keep her person and clothing devoid of colour, eat frugally, stay out of sight and keep away from traditional celebrations. If she speaks to anyone, particularly a man, she is cursed and treated as a loose woman. Among the Rajputs, a widow is given no bread for the first 10 days after her husband's death. A widow from Manipuri is reported to have been locked up without food for 10 days in a darkened room.

Such restrictions and taboos are intended to kill all hope and desire. It is the worst kind of systematic enslavement. The trauma of widowhood mainly stems from the fact that women are so conditioned that their entire psyche is built upon the husband's identity.

The parallel which Mr. Gujral sought to establish simply falls to the ground when we consider this inhuman treatment customarily meted out to Hindu widows, not to speak of the stigma attaching to the modern divorcee. There can surely be no parallel between widow-burning, widow-victimization and the non-provision of maintenance for a divorced woman by her ex-husband, particularly when it is not a question of the woman receiving that maintenance at all but of her simply receiving that maintenance from alternative sources under Islamic law. In what sense is such an arrangement maltreatment? It is to outdated Hindu practices alone that such a term as 'maltreatment' should be applied.

Consider the innumerable widows who, entirely at the mercy of their in-laws, continue to suffer in silence, while thousands of others who are driven out by their in-laws, or even their own relatives, migrate to holy places such as Hardwar, Rishikesh, Kashi, and Vrindaban in search of human dignity, and religious solace and ultimately salvation.

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Go any time to Vrindaban and you will find about 2000 Bengali widows lodged in temples, in hovels, begging for a meagre living, working as menials and often the consorts of pandas and religious mountebanks.

A 70-year old widow from Nadia, married at 11 and at 35, impoverished by paying for medical care for two sons who eventually died, can barely walk because of a broken leg. She says that she has no desires at all, lives from day to day and prays to God to take her away. Another widow in Vrindaban came to stay there, because she had made the mistake of selling her own home and entrusting the proceeds to her daughter, whereupon she was so mistreated by her daughter and son-in-law that she vowed rather to beg in Vrindaban than lead such a life of indignity.

For such widows, the 'holy' place is a living hell from which death is the only exit. When they eventually die – sometimes in the streets – their bodies are unceremoniously cast into the Yamuna by the town scavengers. "For a widow, there is nothing. There is only God the only solace."

Naghubhai, 82, is a shaven Madhava Brahmin widow who lives in Bangalore. Her husband, Srinavasa died 20 years ago. She is barefoot, draped in the *Kernpusere* and her emaciated, wizened form is a testimony to years of self-denial. Asked why she shaved her head, Naghubhai says: "According to the shastras (Scriptures) I had to do it. This way we can avoid the eyes of man. If even one strand of a widow's hair falls on the ground, her husband will go to hell."

The common superstition is that seeing a widow, particularly a shaven one, is a bad omen. In other words, whatever task you have undertaken will not be fulfilled. Those who believe in the superstition go back home to pray before God. Two common words of abuse in Kannada are *rnundernaga* and *bolirnaga* which mean 'son of a shaven widow' (an illicit offspring).

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Indeed, it was the unreasoning force of Hindu attitudes which gave rise to the practice of sati in the first place; the poor widows no doubt felt that being burnt just once was a lesser evil than 'burning' for the rest of their lives. This view is supported by a report drawn up by a Bombay Union of Journalists based on a visit made by a study team to Deorala in Rajasthan in October, 1987.

Re-marriage for the Hindu widow of an orthodox family is simply not within the realms of possibility. It is considered even more disgraceful than leaving one's husband for another man. Among some Brahmin castes, it is considered sacrilegious and invites total excommunication. Where *naata* is allowed, the woman is not even considered married. She remains a *naata* even when the man decides to marry another woman. Among several castes, the in-laws, under the *jhagra* system, simply auction off the widow to the highest bidder.

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This is the plight of women who have to live out their lives in the terrible shadow of Hindu tradition. Islamic tradition by contrast, creates no such problems for a Muslim widow or divorcee. The door to re-marriage is held wide open for her. It is true that in pre-Islamic society, widows and divorcees were looked down upon but the Prophet himself married widows so that this pernicious attitude might finally be eradicated. The other reason that the Muslim widow or divorcee is not forced into a life of humiliation and degradation is that Islamic law clearly gives her the right to inherit family property. The same right makes it possible for her to live honourably without entering into another marriage, should she wish to remain single.

Even though the law – the Hindu succession Act – confers 'equal property and inheritance rights on women, Hindu widows are rarely given their fair share. In rural India, it is common for patwaris and tehsildars to help contenders for property left to a widow by transferring it to other names. The usually illiterate women, traumatised by the loss of their husbands, are hardly in a position to take up legal battles. They can fight neither against their brothers-in-law nor against their own brothers. Poor rural widows are generally either kept as free domestic labour, or are encouraged to go to ashrams so that in-laws can seize their property.

It is a seldom appreciated fact that according to Islamic tradition, there is no difference in the status of a widow, wife, divorcee or spinster. But the main fact which has gone unheeded is that with adequate provision having been made for divorcee under Islamic law, there is no need for here to seek maintenance from her ex-husband. In the now infamous Shah Bano case, subsequent events proved that the divorced woman had sought maintenance not out of necessity, but out of vengefulness for, after the divorce, it was found that her needs were being fully met in her own parents' home.

It is a seldom appreciated fact that according to Islamic tradition, there is no difference in the status of a widow, wife, divorcee or spinster.

The options before a Hindu widow in a traditional environment are limited to two: either commit Sati or live at the mercy of others. The latter course is one of such degrading self-effacement that it is no wonder that Sati often seems infinitely preferable. Take the case of young Brahman widows in Karnataka who must shave their heads, walk barefoot, remain completely unadorned except for a red sari (without a

blouse) and sleep on the floor. Their shadows must not fall on the havan (sacred fire) at puja ceremonies, and they are expected, as in other parts of the country, to subsist on one meal a day and to stay away from auspicious occasions and ceremonies. The widow is seen as a *mailege* (soiled person) till, through years of self-denial and prayer, she becomes pure. It sometimes happens that young widows enter into illicit relationships. Although this is frowned upon it is considered preferable to re-marriage which is nothing short of sacrilegious.

Even in a modern, more enlightened environment, where widows are decently taken care of, there is a feeling of unease, if not unhappiness. A certain widow in this position, when asked about the quality of her life, replied, "Pradhin Sapnehu Sukh naahin." (A dependant woman knows no peace, even in her dreams). But this does not apply in the case of Muslim divorcees. Their having been given property rights by Islam gives them that feeling of self-esteem and confidence so necessary to the leading of a normal, happy, energetic existence. If they choose to live in the family circle, they do so as a matter of right, and not with the feeling of being there on sufferance and eternally at the beck and call of others.

In the late 19th century, the renowned educationist, Pundita Ramabai Saravati (1858-1922), who studied the plight of Brahmin widows, wrote that the life of a Hindu widow, "destitute as it is of the least literary knowledge, void of all hope, empty of every pleasure and social advantage, becomes intolerable, a curse to herself and society at large." She concludes, "Remarriage is not available, nor would it be at all times desirable as mitigation of the sufferer's lot. So the poor, helpless human, with the one chance of ending her miseries in the Sati rite taken away from her, remains as in ages past, with none to help." Nearly a century later, little seems to have changed.

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The striking difference in the respective living conditions of Hindu and Muslim women was highlighted by a statement made by Mr. Rajendar Sachchar in the course of a speech at a New Delhi function in April last year: "... that, historically, Islam had been very liberal and progressive in granting property rights to women. It is a fact that there were no property rights given to Hindu women until 1956 when the Hindu Code Bill was passed, whereas Islam had granted these rights to women over 1400 years ago." (The *Statesman*, Delhi, April 26, 1986)

Based on a special feature on Hindu widows in *India Today*, November 15, 1987.